

The Spirit of Carlyle in the Old South



GERALD M. STRAKA*

“THE spirit of Thomas Carlyle is abroad in the land,” stated the *Southern Quarterly Review* in 1848; and in the South, this truth became increasingly apparent as the decade of the 1850's passed to the “irrepressible conflict.” Carlyle's virulent attacks on what seemed to him the sham and injustice of the modern world, raised up in the antebellum South a sympathetic reaction against forces which seemed to threaten the delicate fabric of Southern life: industrialism, emancipation, and democracy.

Carlyle had reached the zenith of his powers by 1850.¹ *Sartor Resartus* (1833) and *Past and Present* (1843) had established him as one of the leading critics of contemporary life. *Heroes and Hero Worship* (1841) had shown him to be, if not a brilliant philosopher, at least a powerful social theorist. *The French Revolution* (1837) and *The Letters of Cromwell* (1845) had given him a reputation for historical scholarship. But what ensured Carlyle's fame among his contemporaries, and what guaranteed him a regular reading audience, was that he was felt to be as serious and as earnest as any practical man could be. So it was that when in 1850 *Latter-Day Pamphlets* appeared, the reading public crowded the book stalls to learn what the sensitive mind of Carlyle made of the latter-day.

To Thomas Carlyle, democratic nationalism and the frightful picture of the 1848 revolts on the Continent were the prophetic vision of things to come in England. To his

* Mr. Straka is a doctoral candidate and teaching assistant in English History at the University of Wisconsin, and a member of Delta Phi Chapter. The work of which this paper is a part was written at the University of Virginia under a National Woodrow Wilson fellowship.

¹ See David Alec Wilson, *Carlyle at His Zenith, 1848-1852* (London, 1927).

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way of thinking, "mobocracy" and the final ruin of civilization were inevitable, unless the labor question could be solved. So wrought-up over fears of anarchy was he, that for the first and only time in his life he considered going into Parliament. "I felt that nothing could prevent me from getting up in the House and saying all that," he said, referring to the message of his *Latter-Day Pamphlets*.²

The theme of the eight pamphlets, and, indeed, of all Carlyle's works, was man and the universe governed by "the Everlasting Laws of Nature." The universe was seen as a harmonious whole, all parts acting in conjunction for the benefit of the whole, and cooperating and abiding by the law to their mutual satisfaction — all, that is, except man, who had departed from the universal natural pattern of hierarchy. Democracy was described as "monstrous, loud, blatant, inarticulate as the voice of chaos."³ ". . . Democracy, we apprehend, is forever impossible! So much, with certainty of loud astonished contradiction from all manner of men at present, but with sure appeal to the Law of Nature and the ever-abiding Fact, may be suggested and asserted once more. The Universe itself is a Monarchy and Hierarchy. . . ." ⁴ According to Carlyle, the sham of equalitarian principles consisted in ignoring the fact that some few men are born to govern, and government by ballot-box would deny the essential of natural aristocracy.

To Carlyle, the failure of the emancipation policy in the West Indies stood as an indictment against the Anglo-Saxon race, the consequence of foolishly ignoring the nature of things. He had studied the romanticized figure of the noble savage, and would have none of the fanciful notions of a book like Harriet Martineau's *Toussaint L'Ouverture*: "How she has made such a beautiful 'Black Washington' or 'Washington-

² *Ibid.*, p. 300.

³ Thomas Carlyle, *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (New York, 1872), p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

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Christ-Macready' . . . of a rough-handed, hard-headed, semi-articulate gabbling Negro. . . ."⁵ He felt he must warn the people, and in the spirit of an Old Testament prophet, he penned his damning attack, "Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question" for *Fraser's Magazine* (December, 1849).

Carlyle advocated nothing short of unlimited imperial expansion and enslavement for "Quashee:" "Wherever, in British territory, there exists a Black man, and needful work to the just extent is not to be got out of him, such a law [of slavery], in defect of better, should be brought to bear upon said Black man!"⁶

Carlyle lived out the decade of the fifties in the glow of his righteousness. He devoted himself to his *magnum opus*, *Frederick the Great*, the "Last of the Kings," the first two volumes of which appeared in 1858. *Frederick* became the Bible of the Hohenzollerns, while the *Latter-Day Pamphlets* provided an argument for conservatism everywhere.

The climate of Southern opinion had experienced a shift in the wind since Jefferson's time. By 1850, the South had taken a turn to the right, and had begun to think not only in terms of the South, but of the South as a nation. Sectionalism was becoming nationalism. Perhaps a leading cause was the increase in the number of those who found in slavery nothing of which to be ashamed. History, the laws of economics, and the Bible were put in use to show the superiority of the slave system over free society. The South became more and more conscious of a desire to establish cultural and intellectual independence. Slavery, as an economic necessity, had to be defended against the increasing abolitionist propaganda from the North. Pleas were made by men like William Gilmore Simms for a pure Southern literature, based on Southern life and tradition and using local settings, in the hope of ending

⁵ Quoted in Emery Neff, *Carlyle* (London, 1932), pp. 226-227.

⁶ Carlyle, "Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question," *Fraser's Magazine*, XL (January, 1850), 677.

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this influence. But the South was by no means blind to what others across the sea were doing. The German romanticists, Schiller, Fichte, and Herder were seen striving after national expression. The idealic writings of Thackeray and Tennyson were widely read.⁷ But the dispeptic style of Thomas Carlyle found a special place in the Southern mind.

Carlyle had received his first moneys from the sale of American editions of his works while he was still relatively unknown in England.⁸ By the late 1840's, his fame was ensured at home, and his popularity in the Old South waxed greater than ever.

The spirit of Thomas Carlyle is abroad in the land. The strong thinker, the earnest soul, is making an impress wherever the Saxon tongue and Saxon blood prevail. Here, in our Western World, even more than in his own native Isle, is the advocate of faith and sincerity and work, the delineator of man unclothed, the investigator of the great secrets of the Past and the Present, beginning to be appreciated.⁹

Thus in 1848, the *Southern Quarterly Review* expressed indebtedness to the Scottish pamphleteer. Carlyle "is every way suited to the young American mind," the article says, for the "doctrine of Hero-worship . . . is an essential element of republican nature. . . . The mass of men have always been dependent on the superior mind."¹⁰ Carlyle was the one great author who fought the literary battle abroad in defense of what the South believed:

There are still very many minds at the North not yet possessed

⁷ See Avery O. Craven, *The Growth of Southern Nationalism, 1848-1861* [*History of the South*, VI] (Baton Rouge, 1953), especially chapter VII, "The Center Shifts," 172-206; and, Rollin G. Osterweiss, *Romanticism and Nationalism in the Old South* (New Haven, 1949), chapter III, "European Ideas in Transit," pp. 24-40.

⁸ See letter from Carlyle to Emerson, March 16, 1838, C. E. Norton, ed., in *Carlyle and Emerson Correspondence*, I, (Boston, 1892), 151-157.

⁹ "Carlyle's Works," *Southern Quarterly Review*, XIV (July, 1848), 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

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by the "madness of folly" on the subject of slavery, and who regard the question in much the same light that we do; but in England it seems to have extended to all ranks and conditions. . . . We are able, however, to point with satisfaction to two distinguished exceptions: to the London Times, the ablest newspaper in the world; and to Thomas Carlyle, the greatest, the wisest, and the bravest living author. . . .¹¹

Carlyle was generally ranked second to none in the esteem of the South. His ideas on strong government, slavery, and the laws of nature earned for him the title, "the profoundest thinker who writes the English language."¹² William Gilmore Simms thus pictured Carlyle: ". . . we have in latter days seen Carlyle, boldly looking through all the mists and mystifications on the subject, and probing it [slavery] with an independent analysis, with which neither prescription, nor prejudices, nor selfish policy, could be permitted to interfere."¹³ He seemed to the South the one ray of hope in a world gone mad on talk of reform and emancipation, and for this reason Carlyle was given "the honor of presiding over the Republic of letters."¹⁴

When the "Negro Question" appeared in *Fraser's Magazine* in December, 1849, as the overture to the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, reaction in the North was mixed,¹⁵ but in the

¹¹ "British and American Slavery," *Southern Quarterly Review*, XXIV (October, 1853), 410.

¹² "The Counter Current, or Slavery Principle," *DeBow's Review*, XXI (July, 1856), 93.

¹³ William Gilmore Simms, *The Pro-Slavery Argument* (Philadelphia, 1853), pp. 197-198.

¹⁴ "Carlyle and Macaulay," *Southern Literary Messenger*, XIV (August, 1848), 476.

¹⁵ See John Greenleaf Whittier, *Literary Recreations and Miscellanies* (Boston, 1854), pp. 34-47: "A late number of *Fraser's Magazine* contains an article bearing the unmistakable impress of the Anglo-German peculiarities of Thomas Carlyle, entitled 'An Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question,' which would be interesting as a literary curiosity were it not in spirit and tendency so unspeakably wicked as to excite in every rightminded reader a feeling of amazement and disgust." — "Thomas Carlyle on the Slave Question," p. 34.

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South it was well received. The article did much to establish Carlyle among Southerners as an advocate of their form of society. When the "Negro Question" was attacked by British and American critics, a "Carolinian" (probably E. J. Pringle) published a defense of Carlyle and Southern slavery in *Fraser's*.¹⁶ The "Discourse" was reprinted in its entirety in the 1851 edition of John Campbell's *Negro-Mania*,¹⁷ and when *De Bow's Review* reprinted it under the title, "Carlyle on West Indian Emancipation," the editor's introduction explained why it was given space:

It is a piece of pungent satire, upon the whole body of pseudo philanthropists, who, within the last few years, have been a curse to our own country, as well as to England. The West India question is, for the first time, put in its true light before the English people, . . . We are sure that he [the reader] will agree with us, that the case of Quashee is disposed of with a master hand, and left in its nakedness, without a single prop or support. When British writers can so speak, it is time for Northern fanaticism to pause and reflect.¹⁸

Latter-Day Pamphlets appeared a few months after "The Negro Question." The Southern critics noted how these productions had "been met with a universal hoot and sneer throughout Europe and America; . . . and yet they may prove veritable inspirations in strange guise. . . ." ¹⁹ The solitariness of the Scot's position prompted Southern critics to view Carlyle as an Old Testament prophet, a modern "preacher" writing the Book of Ecclesiastes for the latter day, unheeded and unhonored in his own nation: "Jerusalem fur-

¹⁶ "Slavery in the Southern States," *Fraser's Magazine*, XLVI (October, 1852), 476-490.

¹⁷ John Campbell, *Negro-Mania* (Philadelphia, 1851), chapter XVI consists of Carlyle's "Discourse," pp. 502-520.

¹⁸ "Carlyle on West Indian Emancipation," *DeBow's Review*, VII (June, 1850), 527.

¹⁹ G. F. Holmes, "Latter-Day Pamphlets," *Southern Quarterly Review*, XVIII (November, 1855), 316.

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nishes by no means the solitary example of a community accustomed to kill the prophets, and stone them that were sent unto her. . . ." ²⁰ George Fitzhugh saw the "slavery principle . . . inculcated throughout those eloquent pamphlets. . . . Much and rigorous government" was prescribed as the cure for society, and "slavery, for the lazy, reprobate, and idle." ²¹

Not all Southern criticism of the *Pamphlets* was favorable however. The reviewer for the *Southern Literary Messenger*, in open hostility, turned one of Carlyle's phrases against his work: "To borrow an expression from the pamphlet itself, it is a farrago of 'fatal, infinite nonsense.'" ²² The *Messenger* was most effective in pointing out the weakness of Carlyle's nebulous solution for the latter-day problems: "Most worshipful Sir Oracle, you tell us we are but mice — that our so-called Liberty is a terrible cat, with claws and talons for our destruction — and that the only remedy is to put a bell upon her. Now, if you please, be good enough to teach us *how to bell the cat*." ²³ But the *Messenger* was one of the few exceptions.

The *Quarterly Review* took a definite sectional stand: "Carlyle has offended the people of the North, since he has come out, sensibly, philosophically, and like a man, superior to cant and false philanthropy in favor of negro slavery." ²⁴ Perhaps with the example of the *Messenger* in mind, the *Quarterly* commented: "But the wonder is, to see so many of our Southern presses — not having read these pamphlets — actually repeating the clamours of their Yankee file-leaders — actually denouncing, in their abominable blindness, one of their best friends and champions." ²⁵ As time went on, the *Pamphlets* played an ever-increasing role in Southern thought:

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ "The Counter Current," *loc. cit.*, p. 93.

²² *Southern Literary Messenger*, XVI (April, 1850), 254.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

²⁴ *Southern Quarterly Review*, XVII (July, 1850), 509.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

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"It is time that the study of Aristotle's Politics and Economics were revived. That work and the Latter Day Pamphlets of Mr. Carlyle, furnish the best refutations of socialism and abolition. They should both be text books in our colleges. . . ." ²⁶

"Organization of labor is precisely the question of questions for all governments whatsoever," Carlyle had said. Labor should be channeled into useful endeavors, and the state should take an active leadership in seeing to it that the cap-tainless masses are guided, under the "beneficent whip" if necessary, in order to prevent the sinking of all civilization.²⁷ The South found this doctrine of labor sound and reasonable. Mr. Carlyle was regarded as the "spokesman for the laboring classes," propounding ideas for labor's benefit.²⁸ In "The People," an article which appeared in the *Southern Quarterly* in 1854, Carlyle's way was seen as the only true path to the utopia of such democrats as Kossuth, the Hungarian liberal, who toured America in 1852 seeking arms and money for European democratic forces:

We would not have the people turn away from Kossuth, or from Carlyle. Let them listen to Kossuth, guardedly, with the hope of reaching to his standard, at some distant day. Let them look to Carlyle, and to history for what they for the most part, now are. If they are wise they will see more of true love for them in the strong, almost sublime, feeling of the Englishman, than in the fluent flattery of the Magyar. If they would realize the Utopia of the latter, it can only be through the acceptance of the hard truths of the former. If they yearn after "inspiration," they must realize that the only path, to "inspiration," is through rough and hard training. . . . ²⁹

²⁶ "Black Republicanism in Athens," *DeBow's Review*, XXIII (July, 1857),

23.

²⁷ Carlyle, "Occasional Discourse," p. 675; Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 29 and 234; Carlyle, *Pamphlets*, p. 30.

²⁸ "The Conflict of Capital and Labor," *Russell's Magazine*, III (July, 1858), 297.

²⁹ "The People," *Southern Quarterly Review*, XXV (January, 1854), 40-41.

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Only in labor can man find his true purpose in life, said Carlyle, for only by the sweat of his brow will he live:

We would speak to those who are not seduced by the false sentiments and fine phrases of pretended philanthropists—we would address ourselves to those who believe that even Carlyle has discovered that "labor is a debt due to humanity"—that the sufferings incident to labor are not confined to any climate or complexion, and must ever remain whilst the primal curse rests on man.⁸⁰

George Fitzhugh, the most influenced of Carlyle's Southern disciples, felt as Carlyle, that strong leadership was the only practical answer to the organization of labor question. "No association, no efficient combination of labor can be effected till men give up their liberty of action and subject themselves to a common despotic head or ruler."⁸¹ Fitzhugh, who had made his mark on the public mind with his contributions to *De Bow's Review*, his *Sociology for the South* (1854), and his *Cannibals All! or the Failure of Free Society* (1857), had been flattered to find that his ideas corresponded closely with those of the Scottish pamphleteer: "The very titles of our works are synonomous — for the 'Latter Day' is the 'Failure of Free Society.' "⁸² But Fitzhugh shared with his master not only his ability to criticise the evils of the time, but the same failure to present a solution, leaving this to the nebulous rule that as population grows, so must government:

We (for we are a Socialist) agree with Mr. Carlyle, that the action of free society must be reversed. That, instead of relaxing more and more the bonds that bind man to man, you must screw them

⁸⁰ "A Few Thoughts on Slavery," *Southern Literary Messenger*, XX (April, 1854), 195.

⁸¹ George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society* (Richmond, 1854), p. 61.

⁸² Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!* (Richmond, 1857), p. xx. See Harvey Wish's excellent studies, *George Fitzhugh, Propagandist of the Old South* [Southern Biography Series] (Baton Rouge, 1943); and *George Fitzhugh, Conservative of the Old South* (Charlottesville, 1938).

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up more closely. . . . And this is eminently true in America, where from the nature of things, as society becomes older and population more dense, more of government will be required.³³

The slavery question — for the South an obvious corollary to the labor question — found one of its basic defenses in the theory of the Negro's racial inferiority. Here again Carlyle added weight to Southern argument. Thomas R. R. Cobb, the Georgia legalist who defended slavery, concluded with Carlyle that the Negroes are by nature “ ‘. . . servants to those that are born lords . . . [over them].’ ”³⁴ The “Negroes of the Congo . . . exhibit the most disgusting moral, as well as physical portraits of man. And yet, we repeat with Carlyle, ‘not a bad fellow either, this poor Quashee, when *tolerably guided*.’ Guidance, however, he does need.”³⁵ Thus it was presumed that the only relationship possible between the races was black subordination to white authority, for not only did this seem natural, but, as Carlyle pointed out, it was just to the inferior race. The apparent folly of the abolitionists was that they

would permit the horse and the negro to luxuriate in liberty in the summer and starve in winter. Not so a sensible Englishman and profound philosopher like Carlyle, to whom we are indebted for this illustration. He thinks the liberated negroes in the West Indies are no more operated on in the regulation of their lives, by reason, than the horse or the ox. But like the ox and ass, the negro may be domesticated; he is not like the Indian of America, an animal *feroe naturae*.³⁶

To the South, Carlyle vindicated slavery “by shewing that each of its apparent relaxations in England has injured the laboring class.”³⁷ The abolition of slavery by England was a

³³ Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!*, pp. 369-370.

³⁴ Thomas R. R. Cobb, *An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery*, I. (Philadelphia, 1858), 30.

³⁵ “Negro-Mania,” *DeBow's Review*, XII (May, 1852), 518.

³⁶ Fitzhugh, *Sociology*, pp. 286-287.

³⁷ Fitzhugh, *Cannibals*, p. xxi.

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prime example of the failure of emancipation to better the conditions of laborers, even of white laborers:

... the working classes of Britain compare unfavorably with many slaveholding countries. . . . Carlyle compares the condition of the Saxon slave with the modern peasant; and, after showing its preferableness, concludes, "Liberty, I am told, is a divine thing. Liberty, when it becomes the liberty to die by starvation is not so divine."³⁸

By 1858, Carlyle was regarded by most Southern writers, not only as a great theorist, but as a friend and teacher as well. The first two volumes of *Frederick the Great* appeared in that year and were warmly received: "For our own part, we are always ready to listen to Mr. Carlyle whenever the spirit may move him to utterance. . . . We owe Mr. Carlyle much; he has come as a friend and invaluable teacher to many minds; and his books are to be cherished as a possession forever."³⁹ Even the *Literary Messenger*, so caustic eight years before, came to an understanding with Carlyle:

Perhaps since Macaulay's *History of England*, no book has been looked for with more eager expectation than this. . . . The time has gone by for any remarks on the extraordinary style of this author. . . . We must accept the style as a fact, . . . and admit that, after all, it is capable of effects in the hands of its master more vivid and powerful, perhaps, than are produced by any other writer of English at the present day.⁴⁰

De Bow's came out with a sixteen-page article on Carlyle's *Frederick* filled with encomiums for the man and his work, and giving a vivid picture of the militant South in the summer of 1860:

In most of Christendom, society is dissolved, disintegrated and demoralized; and we fully concur with Mr. Carlyle, "What then

³⁸ Cobb, *op. cit.*, p. cxxxii.

³⁹ *Russell's Magazine*, IV (December, 1858), 276, 281.

⁴⁰ *Southern Literary Messenger*, XXVII (November, 1858), 393.

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must be a new world, if there is to be any world much longer!" Our seceding States best understand and practice the art of government. Admirable models for a "New World" may be found there. . . . A master race necessarily improves upon itself, and practices as severe a drill as it subjects its inferiors to. . . . The gentlemen of the South are better horsemen, better marksmen, have more physical strength and activity, and can endure more fatigue than their slaves. Besides, they have the lofty sentiments and high morals of a master race, that would render them unconquerable. Their time is occupied in governing their slaves and managing their farms—they are slaves themselves to their duties, and have no taste for that prurient love of licentious liberty which has depraved and demoralized free society.⁴¹

When the Civil War finally erupted, it proved the most distressing event in Carlyle's long life. He saw in the conflict only the "self-murder of a million brother Englishmen, for the sake of sheer phantasms, and totally false theories upon the Nigger."⁴² Thus he cursed the War as the "Nigger-Agony."⁴³ As for the cause of the War, Carlyle's dicta on the subject was a simple: "Why, the difference between the North and the South in relation to the nigger is just this, — the South says to the nigger 'God bless you! and be a slave,' and the North says, 'God damn you! and be free.' "⁴⁴ His only published comment on the war was a short dialogue which appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine*, entitled, "The American Iliad in a Nutshell:"

Peter of the North (to Paul of the South).—"Paul, you unaccountable scoundrel, I find you hire your servants for life, not by the month or year as I do! You are going straight to Hell, you ———!" Paul.—"Good words, Peter! The risk is my own; I am willing to take the risk. Hire you your servants by the month or the day and get straight to Heaven; leave me to my own method."

⁴¹ "Frederick the Great, by Thomas Carlyle," *DeBow's Review*, XXIX (August, 1860), 155-156.

⁴² Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, J. A. Froude, ed.; (New York, 1872), p. 309.

⁴³ Wilson, *Zenith*, p. 53.

⁴⁴ D. A. Wilson and D. W. MacArthur, *Carlyle in Old Age, 1865-1881* (London, 1934), p. 192.

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Peter.—“No, I won’t. I will beat your brains out first!” (*And is trying dreadfully ever since, but cannot yet manage it.*)—

T. C.

3d May, 1863⁴⁵

Some Southerners had tried to enlist Carlyle’s aid in support of their cause, and by 1864 “there was now a Virginian at each ear, not only of Carlyle, but of some other literary men. . . .”⁴⁶ One of those Virginians was a Dr. Hodge of Richmond. After their introduction, Carlyle “became the hearer, listened with intense interest, his eyes filled with tears” while Dr. Hodge “described the scenes of the War through which he had just passed.”⁴⁷ John R. Thompson, another Virginia caller, carried on “an active propaganda in the interest of the South”⁴⁸ among Carlyle and other literary men. Thompson, the former editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, kept a daily journal of his Continental trip in 1864. The entry for October 14, records a pleasant evening with

the great Thomas Carlyle at 58 Cheyne Row—Chelsea. . . . He ran off into table-talk about tea and coffee, pipes and tobacco, and then inquired about the Confederacy, its resources, its army, its supplies of food, its powder, and read us a letter from Ralph Waldo Emerson in which the Yankee philosopher declared that the struggle going on in America was the great Battle of Humanity. Mr. Carlyle said he could make no sense of this at all.⁴⁹

On November 19, Thompson called again: “Mr. Carlyle made many inquiries concerning General Lee whom he greatly ad-

⁴⁵ Carlyle, “The American Iliad in a Nutshell,” *Macmillan’s Magazine*, VIII (July, 1863), 301.

⁴⁶ Moncure D. Conway, *Autobiography*, I (New York, 1904), 306.

⁴⁷ D. A. Wilson, *Carlyle to Threescore-and-Ten, 1853-1865* (London, 1929), pp. 538-539. Although Wilson gives the name “Hodge,” he probably means Dr. Moses Drury Hoge, a Presbyterian minister who went to England in 1862 to obtain Bibles for the Confederate troops. See *D. A. B.*

⁴⁸ Conway, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

⁴⁹ John R. Thompson’s Journal for 1864 (McGregor Collection of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville), entry of October 14.

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mires.”⁵⁰ Jefferson Davis also received the esteem of the latter-day prophet. Carlyle declared that looking at the war, Davis seemed to him one of the manliest actors in it, and whatever the jury might say at his trial, the grand jury of mankind had already declared him not guilty.⁵¹ He had apparently corresponded with Davis during and after the war, but the letters have never been examined. Years after the war, Carlyle recalled his feelings at about the time of Davis’s capture:

Amongst the last things she [Jane Carlyle] told me that evening was, with deep sympathy, “Mr. Thompson (a Virginian who sometimes came) called one night: he says there is little doubt they will hang President Davis!” upon which I almost resolved to write a pamphlet upon it, had not I myself been so ignorant about the matter, so foreign to the whole abominable fratricidal “war.” . . . In a day or two I found I could not enter upon that thrice abject Nigger-delirium. . . . and that probably I should do poor Davis nothing but harm.⁵²

The “Nigger-Agony” closed and the “American Iliad” was complete. Carlyle, during those five years, had written steadily on *Frederick* and had not gotten to the bottom of the American affair. Although he seems to have sympathized with the South, he had “respected the desire of the Americans to preserve their Union.”⁵³ But, inasmuch as both parties chose war as a means of deciding political issues, Carlyle, the hero-worshipper, the supposed believer in force, power, and might, could not hope for anything to come out of the bitter contest.

Carlyle’s influence on the growth of Southern nationalism is obvious. It is the nature of that influence with which we are concerned; and in this consideration, first let it be stated that one segment of Southern thought perhaps had taken Carlyle’s doctrine of the hero too literally, losing faith in government

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, entry of November 19; see also December 14.

⁵¹ Wilson and MacArthur, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.

⁵² Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, p. 309.

⁵³ Conway, *op. cit.*, p. 363.

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by law and wishing to substitute government by men. To those like George Fitzhugh, Carlyle was a socialist who prescribed despotic centralization for the ills of modern society. While concurring that this was the only practical solution, they modified Carlyle's love for the single despot by stating that the despotism of a landed aristocracy could be as efficient and as good as a Frederick William.

Beyond this, the Southern theorists were as vague as Carlyle in prescribing a positive program of conservative policy. Historically, conservatism has usually suffered because, by its very nature, it has had to move slowly, and thus has had to accept changes, merely because they were accomplished facts. The conservative South of the 1850's found itself faced by an increasing clamor that it reform itself, especially on the slave question. E. J. Pringle, in his defense of Carlyle's "Negro Question," stated the South's position in relation to its critics:

To preach distant reform is very cheap philanthropy,—the cheaper in proportion to the distance. The feeling of self-satisfaction exists without the necessity of personal sacrifice. . . . The South has, however, within a few years, instead of quietly accepting the conclusions of the world without, been earnestly pressing for a solution of the problem required of her. If she can be spared the suggestion of a violent philanthropy that outruns her well-considered plans of reform, she may hope to develop the moral question of slavery *aequo pede* with the economical question.⁵⁴

But this statement was made before the slavery issue dominated the political scene, and before the South was forced to fall back on reactionary defenses.

Carlyle, the leading English conservative, had been forced in indignation to fall back on reactionary tactics. He too searched for a positive program that would not sacrifice principle; and, like the South, he failed to find an adequate solution. Ultimately, both Carlyle and the South were forced, in want of any agreeable alternative, to defend the *status quo*.

⁵⁴ "Slavery in the Southern States," pp. 476 and 489.

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The reason, then, for Carlyle's popularity in the Old South was that he appealed to two main groups: those, like Pringle, who could still admit the need for reform, and those, like George Fitzhugh, who found no need for reform but rather desired an intensification of existing conditions. The former found Carlyle a friend who warned of the dangers of "false philanthropy" and too rapid reform; the latter found the Scot an ally who proposed slavery and strong government for the world. Carlyle thus was considered both a rational conservative reformer, and a power-loving believer in the divine right aristocracy.

One last question poses itself: were the Southerners right in interpreting Carlyle as they did? He never published a direct opinion on the South. He had condemned West Indian policy, but he did not support outright the South's slavery system. Perhaps he did not mean what he said, for he later described *Latter-Day Pamphlets* as "Wrongish, every word of them."⁵⁵ Moncure Conway, the Virginia liberal, recorded this conversation with Carlyle:

The Southerners quite misunderstood Carlyle. One evening Mrs. Carlyle mentioned that after Carlyle had written his "Latter-Day Pamphlet" on the negro question, suppressed in the Northern edition of the pamphlets but published in the South, he received from eminent Southerners letters suggesting that England should restore slavery in her West Indian possessions, in which case the slave States would unite with them, and a great British empire be formed in the New World. Mrs. Carlyle mentioned no names and I asked no questions. Carlyle spoke of the scheme as wild, one he could have no sympathy with at all, but he said to his wife mildly, "It might have been as well not to trouble Mr. Conway with that; I can conceive that it might become his duty to report it to America." It did startle me that eminent Southerners, some ten years before the war, should have wished to throw their States and slavery under the protection of the British flag, but they must have known little of Carlyle to suppose he had any wish to see Great

⁵⁵ Quoted in Wilson, *Zenith*, p. 214.

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Britain expanding. Abhorring the condition of the mass of labourers around him, Carlyle idealized the condition of the negroes in the Southern States; that was all.⁵⁶

Conway believed that the South misunderstood Carlyle, that far from upholding Southern institutions he only used the condition of slaves as a contrast to the pitiful condition of white labor in the British Isles. But was this really the case?

If it were possible to give a clear-cut picture of the relations between the South and Carlyle, the nature of his influence might be better understood. Carlyle's vast correspondence, however, is still too scattered; and that of the "eminent Southerners" with Carlyle, if still in existence, has never been found. One rare letter, however, has survived; and perhaps, in place of pure conjecture, this letter from Carlyle to Beverly Tucker is capable of shedding some light on the problem of how closely the South had gauged Carlyle's true feelings:

Chelsea, London
31st October, 1851

Dear Sir—

Your letter and pamphlets have duly reached me, for which accept my congratulations. The style both of what you write and of what you have spoken invites a considerate interest, and such accordingly you have had from me. . . .

Meanwhile, dark as we are in regard to all details, I think you rather exaggerate to yourself our ignorance as to your essential position in that big controversy. I find it a settled conviction among rational Englishmen, which they frequently express in a careless

⁵⁶ Conway, *op. cit.*, p. 365. Attempts so far to discover who the "eminent Southerners" might have been have proved unavailing. Harvey Wish, in a letter to the author, said he had no idea who they might be. Prof. W. S. Jenkins of the University of North Carolina, who also knew of Conway's reference, stated in a letter to the author that the "eminent Southerners" might have been Beverly Tucker, James Henry Hammond, George Fitzhugh, and William Gilmore Simms. Jenkins also mentioned the importance of studying Southern correspondence, a much neglected field of research. Inquiries to the Department of Manuscripts of the British Museum have uncovered nothing regarding the whereabouts of the Southerners' letters, or information as to whether they still exist.

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way, that the Southern States must ultimately feel driven to separate themselves from the Northern: in which result there is not felt here to be anything treasonous or otherwise horrible. . . .

For you, and other men of sense and manfulness of spirit, who stand in the very coil of Negro complications, and feel practically that you must retain command of your servants, or else quit your place and task in the world, I find it altogether natural that you should, in silence resolve to front all extremities, rather than yield to an intrinsic clamour of that nature, however big-voiced or pretentious it become: in which quarrel, too, what can I say, but "God stand by the *right*," which I clearly perceive you in part are. . . .

Give me leave, in my dim light, but in my real sympathy with your affairs, to hint another thought I have. It is that this clamour from your "Exeter-Hall" and ours, which few persons can regard with less reverence than I, was nevertheless a thing *necessary*. My notion is that the relation of the White man to the Black is not at present a just one according to the Law of the Eternal; and tho' "Abolition" is by no means the way to remedy it, and would be a "remedy" equivalent to killing it, (as I believe) yet, beyond all question, remedied it must be, and peace upon it is not possible till a remedy be found, and begin to be visibly applied. A servant, "hired *for life*," instead of by the day or month? I have often wondered that wise and just men in your region (of whom I believe there are many) have not come upon a good many methods, or at least some method better than those yet in use, of justly enunciating this relation and relieving such asperities of it as become intolerable. Have you, for example, a law by which a Negro, on producing a certain sum of money, possible for the Thrift and foresight of a superior Negro, can *demand* his Freedom?—I could perceive many other laws and practices not quite in use at present; but am at the bottom of my paper, and must end. I shall say only, the Negro Question will be left in peace, when God Almighty's law about it *is* (with tolerable approximation) actually found out and practiced; and never till then.

Might this also be a word to the wisel
With many regards and best wishes.

Yours sincerely
T. Carlyle⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Letter of Carlyle to Beverly Tucker, printed in *Virginia Silhouettes*, ed., Mrs. George P. Coleman, a descendant of Tucker (Richmond, 1934), pp. 46-49.

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In his "real sympathy" for the South's cause, Carlyle proposes what amounts to emancipation. A servant, "hired for life," or freedom for the superior, hard-working Negro, were the two plans he had hinted at in some of his writings. It is interesting to note that here, far from finding slavery in accord with natural law, Carlyle feels that some remedy for it had to be worked out. Furthermore, the tone of this proposal made in a private letter to one "who stands in the very coil of Negro complications," is in marked contrast with the pugnacious defense of slavery he expressed in the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, papers presented for a public out of sympathy with anything that upheld slavery. While Carlyle would not compromise for public opinion by approving abolitionism, he was willing to say to a man who believed in slavery that slavery *per se* was not, according to natural law, the best relationship between the two races.

The South, too, "instead of quietly accepting the conclusions of the world without," had been "earnestly pressing for a solution of the problem required of her," but had found slavery preferable to the oversimplification of abolition. Had not politics and intense propaganda rushed the South into open defense of slavery, perhaps such a solution would have been worked out for the benefit of all. But time ran out on both the South and Carlyle; for eighteen sixty-five and Appomattox was the end of an era for the South; just as eighteen sixty-seven and the Reform Bill was the end of an era for Carlyle.⁵⁸ "We must have a new world if we are to have any world at all;" but, ironically, the "new world," when it came, demanded the death of the old as the price of its birth.

⁵⁸ For Carlyle's reaction to the Reform Bill of 1867, see his *Shooting Niagara* (1867), his last attack on what he considered the great illusion, democracy.